

Lake Cities Community Church
July 11, 2010
Pastor Craig Schill
Series: Bible Numbers – Making Them Count!

Fringe Theology or Real Answers?
An introduction to Bible numbers

I have always been interested in the numbers found in the Bible. The repetition of the number seven for example -- Why? The prominent role of the number forty. Twelve tribes of Israel and twelve disciples? Any connection? 666 - The Mark of the Beast. What do these numbers mean? Are these just numbers or is there a theology behind them? For the next several weeks we will explore together the theology of Bible numbers in a series I am calling, "Bible Numbers: Making Them Count."

Think for a moment about numbers in our culture. Let me give you a little test - which number am I referring to? "Lucky number... 7." Good. If someone is really dressed up, we say they are "dressed to what number?... 9s." Two's company, but...3s a crowd." "Hold on - just wait a... second or minute." "Great job, give me a high... 5."

Numbers are important. Throughout history they have been used not just for calculating and math, but for communicating ideas and values. MIT professor and Nobel prize winner Frank Wilczek said, "I went off to college planning to major in math or philosophy-- of course, both those ideas are really the same idea." Numbers are important.

Why Bible Numbers are Not Taught

But, the role and importance of numbers in the Bible is not something we think about often. I'm curious, has anyone here this morning been through a study of Bible numbers before? Heard a sermon on the number seven? No one? Why is that the case? I believe there are three possible reasons.

First it could be that there is little or no value in studying Bible numbers. In the grand scheme of things perhaps scholars and pastors have not found much to talk about in this area. They have looked at the topic and found it wanting. As I have shared this series with a few people, I have received raised eyebrows. Some feel there is little value here – and this is one possibility it is just not taught (which of course, I disagree with).

A second possible reason we have not heard much teaching on Bible numbers is because much of the past work has been theologically suspect; fringe theology – up there with handling snakes and conspiracy theories. The study of Bible numbers has led to all kinds of crazy systems and conclusions. J.B. Segal in the 1965 *Journal of Semitic Studies* said, “Statistics in the Bible, like the calculations of the Great Pyramids of Egypt, have been a fatal attraction for cranks and crackpots – even for wise men in their less guarded moments.” (J.B. Segal, 1965, *Journal of Semitic Studies*). For this reason many Christians shy away from the study of Bible numbers all together. It has a bad reputation.

A third reason Bible numbers can be overlooked is that in our western, rational, linear culture numbers are mostly used as numbers. Though there are a few exceptions, numbers are usually used as numbers. I go to the store and buy twelve eggs – OK 12, that is

it. I don't stop to contemplate the meaning of "12." Look! A **six**-pack of soda! I got three of them...we don't make any connotations to 666. Because numbers are mostly numbers in our western world – we assume they were like that back in Bible times!

But, as we will see through this study, in the Ancient Near East and New Testament times, numbers were used frequently to communicate higher-level concepts. Jewish scholar Ronald Isaacs wrote, "The Jewish Bible is replete with numbers that were sometimes meant to be taken at face value, but more likely to be noteworthy for their symbolic nuances" (*The Jewish Book of Numbers*, xiii). Christian theologian, John Davis said: "The numbers of the Bible play an important role in the general area of hermeneutics, for numbers are important not only in conveying mathematical data, but in formulating literary stylism." (*Biblical Numerology*, 17).

Goal for this Study

And with that quote by Davis, let me explain in more detail my goal for this study. I can summarize it in one word which Davis used: hermeneutics. I desire us to grow in our skill in handling God's word. Paul said to Timothy. 2 Tim. 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. And: 2 Tim. 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

Here is something to consider. There are 31,173 verses in the Bible. How many of them contain numbers? Using my Bible program I found the numbers 1-20 occur in 4,002 separate verses. If we were to add in other numbers in, and it could be that nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of all Bible verses contain some reference to a number. Some of those numbers are used for

simple counting, but others are used as figures of speech with a theological point. As Bible students I want you to be able to come to a number in the Bible and to interpret it according to the intent of the author. The numbers we will be studying (at this point) include the following: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, and 40. I may make some changes to the lineup as we go along.

Fringe Theology / Bible Study Foundations

I mentioned earlier that there is a history of poor hermeneutics when it comes to Bible numbers. I want to now give a little history and go into more depth on ways in which Bible numbers have been misused.

The dubious handling of Bible numbers goes back thousands of years. The most ancient word for Bible numerology is called Gematria. Gematria is the system of assigning a numerical value to a word or phrase. The first evidence of Gematria occurs in the Ancient Near East 1,000 years before Christ. The way it works is that you assign numeric values to each letter in the alphabet. In English we would say the letter 'a = 1', "b=2," c=3" and so on. Then you take a word add up the corresponding value of each letter and draw conclusions from it. My name, Craig, would have the following value: C = 3, R = 18, A = 1, I = 9, G = 7.

Then you add those numbers to get a total of 38. Then the number is divided -- which is 19×2 . Nineteen is a number made up of the number 10 and 9. Two represents division, 10 represents divine order and nine represents God's judgment. And so my name may mean I am someone who overcomes strife by instituting divine order through judging wrongdoing.

Using this and related systems, people have argued that Nero and Henry Kissinger were the antichrist, because their names add up to 666. I also heard that Barney the Dinosaur comes out to 666. Also, in Hebrew, because the letter *vav* = 6, and in English *vav* comes across as a “w,” some have argued that the Internet (www) = 666. And while you can see how this could be quite an interesting exercise - nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is Gematria used or endorsed as a tool of proper interpretation. Yet, it has continued on in various forms up to the present day.

In 1977, a former professional basketball player joined with a friend to publish a book called *Theomatics* – which means the merger of God and Math. They used of form of Gematria for every verse in the New Testament. One example they give is as follows: “One of the most fascinating passages of Scripture is John 21:11, wherein the disciples go fishing, and ‘Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land, full of great fishes, a hundred and fifty-three...” They point out, “This number 153 has taxed the ingenuity and minds of some of the greatest Bible students over the centuries. All have felt that there must be something deeply significant and important about this number.” They then spend thirteen pages going through every word in the passage, adding up numerical values and arguing how various words relate to the number 153. I prefer the explanation by theologian Craig Keener that the catch was so unusual they counted the fish so they could tell their friends!

In 1938 Marion Hull wrote a little book called, “*The God-Breathed Book*” meant to use Bible numbers to defend inspiration. She writes, “I have counted the number of times the name of every prominent character in the Bible occurs and without exception they all conform to the law of numbers, not always to the number 7, but to the number most appropriate to that character. For example, Adam occurs 30 times: 5, the number of grace,

multiplied by 6, the number of man. Abraham, the friend of God, occurs 248 times; a multiple of 8, the number of the Lord Jesus Christ..." Hull was trying to uphold the inspiration of Scripture with random counting, which is not sound Bible study.

The most recent and very popular book in numerology was published in 1997 – called the "*The Bible Code*" which used something called Equidistant Letter Sequence Method to prove that hidden in the Bible were secret codes. Computer programs would skip a certain number of letters; for example they would pick every 4th letter and then see what message was left behind. Through the Bible code one person predicted the return of Christ on May 31, 1998. Another confirmed that Lee Harvey Oswald killed JFK. Others argue that the Bible was really written by space aliens.

All of these examples reflect a Bible study error called eisegesis (say that with me – "eisegesis"). Eisegesis is based on the Greek preposition "eis" which means "into." Eisegesis where you take your presumptions or values and place it onto Scripture. Each one of these numerology systems takes something foreign to the Scripture and places it on top. Rather we should practice exegesis. *Ex* is from the Greek preposition "out of" and means we seek to understand the intent of the original author and nothing more. From Exegesis we get exposition and expository preaching.

Proper Examples of Bible Numbers

And while there has been much abuse in the area of Bible number, what I am trying to argue this morning is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I believe we will find in the topic of Bible numbers rich, theologically sound ground to be tilled.

We will read: [Deut. 6:4](#) “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! What does it mean that God is one? Next week, we will read: [Matt 18:12](#): If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? Why is that one sheep is so important to God? Later we will hear the heavenly seraphim... [Is. 6:3](#) ...call out to another, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” Why is the word “holy” repeated three times? We will read in the New Testament: [Matt. 18:21](#) Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” [Matt. 18:22](#) Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. What is meant by the number seven and seventy? Is six not enough and eight too much? Is 490 really the point of the passage? We will consider the biblical record that: [The rain fell on the earth forty days and nights \(Gen 7:4\)](#), the flood came on the earth for 40 days ([Gen 7:17](#)), At the end of 40 days and nights Moses received the 10 commandments. Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days being tempted by the devil ([Mark 1:13](#)) and we will ask whether the reoccurring of 40 is just a coincidence or is it significant? And we will give consideration to John’s puzzle: [Rev. 13:18](#) Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six. Why 666? Why does John invite us to try to calculate this number?

So begin thinking with me about Bible numbers. Be ready to sift the wheat from the chaff. Prepare yourselves to have the numbers of the Bible speak to you. I will end today with what I think is a beautiful introduction to the topic of Bible numbers by Robert Johnston, a former Brethren pastor in England. He wrote:

“In the great oceans, there still remain parts whose waters have never been disturbed by the sounding line of the Navigator, and where ‘dark unfathomed caves’ hold secrets in wonderful store. Across the far-flung expanses of the heavens dance myriads of stars which even the most powerful telescope has been unable to bring within the gaze of the astronomer. And in spite of the diligent searching of man, an untold wealth of gems still lies hidden in the depths of the earth. So is it with the Word of God particularly in the systematic use of the numbers within it.”(Johnston, *Numbers in the Bible*, 7).

May the Lord bless our expedition - our adventure into the study of Bible numbers; numbers that reflect God’s glory and point us to greater obedience in Christ. Amen.